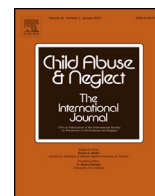




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect



Parents' spontaneous evaluations of children and symbolic harmful behaviors toward their child[☆]

Randy J. McCarthy*, John J. Skowronski, Julie L. Crouch, Joel S. Milner

Center for the Study of Family Violence and Sexual Assault, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 March 2016
Received in revised form
15 December 2016
Accepted 2 February 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Physical child abuse
Child abuse potential
Spontaneous trait inferences
Voodoo Doll task

ABSTRACT

Parents' evaluations of children are believed to be a cognitive contributor to their subsequent child-directed harsh or physically abusive behaviors. The current research examined whether parents' ($N = 100$) evaluations of children were moderated by either (a) the child behavior on which the evaluation was based and (b) parents' measured risk for child physical abuse. The study also explored whether parents' evaluations of children were related to their tendencies to symbolically harm their child. The current study also used a novel method to indirectly assess parents' evaluations of children: A modified Affect Misattribution Procedure. Contrary to a priori expectations, negative evaluations of children were stronger for parents who were at low risk, relative to high risk, for child physical abuse. Nonetheless, we observed that high-risk parents were more likely than low-risk parents to inflict symbolic harm onto their child. In an exploratory analysis we observed that parents who formed more overall negative evaluations of children engaged in more symbolic harm to their child. Although high-risk parents were more likely to symbolically harm their child than low-risk parents, this effect does not seem to be due to high-risk parents' negative child evaluations from negative child behaviors.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Parents routinely infer evaluative information when observing child behaviors (e.g., [Risser, Skowronski, & Crouch, 2011](#)). For example, observing a child who does not comply with a parent's request may elicit an inference that the child is "bad." Such inferences are believed to influence subsequent parenting behaviors, including behaviors that would be considered harsh or physically abusive (e.g., [Milner, 1993](#)). Building on this idea, the current research pursued three ideas about parents' evaluations of children. First, we sought to demonstrate both that parents *spontaneously* form evaluations while encoding children's behaviors (e.g., [Schneid, Crawford, Skowronski, Irwin, & Carlston, 2015](#)) and that the mere presence of a child about whom a previous evaluation has been formed is sufficient to elicit a measurable evaluative response (e.g., [Risser et al., 2011](#)). Second, we examined whether parents' child evaluative inferences differed based on parents' risk for child physical abuse (CPA)—an individual difference variable that is believed to reflect, among other things, differences in parents' schemas about children's behaviors (e.g., [Crouch et al., 2010](#)). Finally, we examined whether parents' evaluative inferences of children were related to their subsequent child-directed behaviors (e.g., [Azar, 1986; Dopke & Milner, 2000](#)).

[☆] This research was partially supported by NIH grant 1R03HD075978-01 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development awarded to the authors.

* Corresponding author at: Center for the Study of Family Violence and Sexual Assault, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115-2854, United States.
E-mail address: rmccarthy3@niu.edu (R.J. McCarthy).

The evaluations that parents form about children are believed to result from the application of child-relevant schemas to the interpretation of children's behaviors. Following this logic, it is believed that parents who hold *different* schemas about children will spontaneously form *different* evaluations of children, even if the behavioral information on which those inferences are based is identical (e.g., Crouch et al., 2010; Farc, Crouch, Skowronski, & Milner, 2008). One individual difference variable that may reflect such differences is parents' risk for CPA. Parents who are at high risk for CPA and parents who are at low risk for CPA are believed to differ in their schematic beliefs about children (Milner, 1993, 2003). According to the social information processing model of CPA (e.g., Milner, 2003), parents who are high-risk for CPA are believed to form more negative evaluations of children in response to children's negative behaviors, and less positive evaluations of children in response to children's positive behaviors, than low-risk parents. However, although CPA risk group differences have reliably emerged in parents' semantic inferences about children (e.g., Crouch et al., 2010; Irwin, Skowronski, Crouch, Milner, & Zengel, 2014; McCarthy et al., 2013), such differences have not reliably emerged in parents' evaluative inferences about children (c.f., Farc et al., 2008; Risser et al., 2011).

In addition to parents' risk for CPA, we examined whether the ambiguity of child behaviors moderated the association between parental CPA risk and parents' evaluations about children. If parents who are at high risk for CPA have different schemas about children than parents who are at low risk for CPA, then differences between high-risk parents' evaluations of children and low-risk parents' evaluations of children are believed to be especially pronounced "when [parents] are interpreting and evaluating situations that involve ambiguous child behaviors" (Milner, 2003, p. 9). To test this assertion, the current research used behaviors that either strongly implied evaluative information about the child or that vaguely implied evaluative information about the child. Finally, we examined whether a parent's tendency to form negative evaluations of children predicted their subsequent behavior toward children. This finding would be consistent with social-cognitive models of general aggression (e.g., DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011) and social-cognitive models of CPA (e.g., Azar, 1986; Milner, 1993, 2003). However, to our knowledge, there has not been any research assessing whether parents' spontaneously-formed evaluations are related to their tendencies to inflict symbolic harm on their child (e.g., DeWall et al., 2013; McCarthy, Crouch, Basham, Milner, & Skowronski, 2016).

Hypotheses derived from each of these three perspectives were tested in the current research. First, given our behavior pretesting results, it was hypothesized that parents would be most likely to form negative evaluations of children who were paired with strongly negative behaviors and would be least likely to form negative evaluations of children who were paired with strongly positive behaviors. Thus, we expected to observe an orderly monotonic relationship between the negativity of a child's behavior and the likelihood that a child would subsequently elicit a negative evaluative response.

Second, we hypothesized that parents' CPA risk status would affect their evaluations of children such that high-risk parents would be more likely than low risk parents to form negative evaluations of children. Moreover, this individual difference was hypothesized to be especially pronounced for children paired with ambiguous behaviors. That is, risk-group-related evaluation differences ought to be especially evident on the vague trials, with high risk parents expected to provide more negative evaluations of children than low risk parents.

Third, we believe that both the interpretation of ambiguous child behaviors and the symbolic harm of their child are both affected by parents' schemas. Thus, we hypothesized that parents' tendency to negatively evaluate children would be associated with their tendency to symbolically harm their child during a subsequent task.

Finally, because we were interested in the idea that parents' evaluations are formed spontaneously during the encoding of child behaviors, the current study used a method that appropriately allowed us to assess those spontaneous evaluative inferences. The method used was a modified Affect Misattribution Procedure (Payne, Cheng, Govorun, & Stewart, 2005) and, to our knowledge, it has not been previously used to examine parents' evaluations of children.

2. Methods

The research described in this article was approved by the human subjects review board at the authors' institution prior to data collection. All materials and stimuli needed to replicate the study as well as the raw data for the current study, can be acquired either by contacting the first author or by visiting this project's page on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/vmumi/>).

2.1. Child behavior development and pretest

In the current research, we were interested in the evaluations that parents form after observing each of a variety of child behaviors. This interest necessitated development of a pool of child behaviors for the current research.

To do so, we first generated 100 descriptions of child behaviors that varied in evaluative implications. Forty-two participants who were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk viewed and rated each behavior description on a seven-point scale ($-3 = \textit{extremely negative}$ and $+3 = \textit{extremely positive}$). The 10 behaviors with the most positive ratings and the 10 behaviors with the most negative ratings were selected and designated as the *strongly positive behaviors* and *strongly negative behaviors*. Two additional sets of 10 behaviors were designated as *vaguely positive behaviors* and *vaguely negative behaviors*. Vague positive behaviors and vague negative behaviors were selected if their average ratings were above/below the mid-point of the scale (as appropriate to the behavior categorization) and if the variances of the ratings were higher than the variances of the strongly-implicative behaviors. Thus, the vague behaviors were rated as less extreme and with less consen-

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4936068>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4936068>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)